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Coleridge's Marginal Method in the *Biographia Literaria*

## I

**F**OREMOST among the many recent discussions of Coleridge's plagiarism are those of Walter Jackson Bate, Norman Fruman, and Thomas McFarland.<sup>1</sup> Bate and Fruman share a similar psychological approach to the problem, but their conclusions could hardly diverge more. Whereas Bate sees Coleridge's thefts as a minor neurotic consequence of deeper and highly sympathetic existential needs, Fruman considers the extensive plagiarisms to be a thoroughly motivated part of a massive neurotic project everywhere characterized by intellectual confusion and moral impotence. Treating Coleridge's plagiarisms in still another way, McFarland successfully avoids an impasse between Bate's sympathy and Fruman's scorn. In *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* he accepts the existence of considerable plagiarism and agrees that there is a general matrix of neurosis from which that practice proceeds, but he proposes that neither circumstance is as important as the still unanswered questions of what, precisely, a plagiarism is and what it may mean in Coleridge's writings. McFarland decides that both the heedlessness and the needlessness of Coleridge's manifold use of others' materials suggest "the explanation, bizarre though it may seem, that we are faced not with plagiarism, but with nothing less than a mode of composition—composition by mosaic organization rather than by painting on an empty canvas" (p. 27). Not only can that comparison be generally applied to the broad range of Coleridge's often fragmentary discourse, it also has the specific virtues both of respecting the intentionality that clearly informs all of Coleridge's intellectual activity and of admitting the formal peculiarity of its manifestations. Indeed, McFarland finds that the "reticulating characteristic of mind," which is represented by Coleridge's mode of composition, is "so abundantly present in Coleridge as to

become almost the hallmark of his intellectual activity" (p. 49). McFarland passes from diagnosis to evaluation with the disclosure of the "central truth" of his study: "that no philosopher is original, that all philosophers use the materials afforded them by their traditions and their peers, that what has always been important in philosophy has been, not the originality of materials, but the coherence and consequence of the ordering of them—the reticulation of the materials" (p. 49). Seen rightly, Coleridge's apparent handicap is a sign of grace.

Several aspects of McFarland's otherwise impressive theory are disturbing. First, he excludes the *Biographia Literaria*, heretofore the touchstone of all theories regarding Coleridge's plagiarisms, from the canon of those works that exhibit Coleridge's "reticulative power." He argues that the "particularly flagrant borrowings in the *Biographia Literaria* can be regarded as the failure, or perversion, of Coleridge's usual working with mosaic materials" (p. 40). Second, although the analogue of the mosaic captures a great deal of Coleridge's characteristic practice, the use of a metaphor from the fine arts can function only cosmetically, since it merely disguises the fact that Coleridge's plagiarism remains a problem, and a problem of his *writing*. It should be treated as a writing problem. Finally, and generally, although McFarland insists on the transcendent coherence of Coleridge's philosophical enterprise, he does not adequately account for the immediate, subversive effect that plagiarism and associated rhetorical strategies have on such a hypothetical coherence. Coleridge may have intended a magnum opus, but he produced some very strange books.

The *Biographia Literaria* is one such book, and this paper is intended as a preliminary study of this work as an example of Coleridgean discourse. My claim is that the most fruitful term that subsumes the variety of discourses in the *Biographia Literaria*, which includes plagiarism,

is marginal discourse. I shall establish this through analysis of the provenance and method of Chapters v, vi, and vii—Coleridge's critique of Hartleian association.

## II

The attraction of the young Coleridge to the doctrine of association as presented in David Hartley's *Observations on Man* is well documented in the lectures, letters, and notebooks of the 1790s.<sup>2</sup> Both Hartley's theory that all knowledge is the result of the simple, mechanical association of ideas and his claim that such association necessarily organizes behavior in progressively more virtuous levels were sources of optimistic assurance for Coleridge. At the same time, however, countervailing convictions kept him from complete allegiance. The existential crux of those reservations emerges forcefully in this 1798 letter to his brother: "Of GUILT I say nothing; but I believe most steadfastly in original Sin: that from our mother's wombs our understandings are darkened; and our organization is depraved, & our volitions imperfect; and we sometimes see the good without wishing to attain it and oftener *wish* it without the energy that wills & performs."<sup>3</sup>

It was to explain a sense of sin and to justify a guilt undreamt of in Hartley's optimistic philosophy that Coleridge turned to the refutation of necessitarian association. A letter to Thomas Poole in 1801 announces an apparent breakthrough: "If I do not greatly delude myself, I have not only completely extricated the notions of Time, and Space; but have overthrown the doctrine of Association, as taught by Hartley, and with it all the irreligious metaphysics of modern Infidels—especially, the doctrine of Necessity" (*CL*, II, 706). Nowhere in his letter or in his other writings of the time, however, does Coleridge indicate exactly what he means by the extrication of the "notions of Time, and Space," nor does he explain why that act should inevitably overthrow association. We may follow Lovejoy<sup>4</sup> here and operate on the assumption that, as Coleridge's disaffection with association has to do with his sense of the sinfulness of the will, any real overthrow would require proof that the free will exists. In that light, Coleridge's claim in this letter looks like an act of Kantian

prowess aimed at establishing the metaphysical possibility of an area where the individual's will is liberated from the bonds of phenomenal causation. Again, following Lovejoy, we may conclude that the attempt is fated to fail, since that autonomous, noumenal will, to be made intelligible as agent or entity, must be understood as either causing or caused, and therefore as determined. To withhold the will from any sort of causation, however, is to make it both logically and, more important, morally unintelligible. That problem bears on one of the central dilemmas in Western metaphysics; and the juxtaposition of new Kantian terms with old variables might well have caused Coleridge some confusion. We may differ from Lovejoy, however, by asserting that it was actually Coleridge's commitment, not his confusion, that led him to withhold the full statement of his position. In the letter to Poole he signified his intention of overthrowing the doctrine of necessitarian association while prudently preserving a deeply needed though highly fragile alternative from suffering a similar subversion. Coleridge's caution is not due to any confusion regarding the sufficiency of a particular proof but to his recognition that the writing of any proof would necessarily submit his cherished principle to dangerous articulations, the ambiguous conditions of language.

Proof lies not only in the various repetitions of this attempted overthrow that follow in the letters and notebooks but also in Coleridge's explicit testimony: "For if the will be unconditional, it must be inexplicable / for to understand a thing is to see what the conditions of it were, & causes—But whatever is in the Will, is the Will, & therefore must be equally inexplicable / —."<sup>5</sup> To attempt to prove the will, to write about it, is to jeopardize its grounds. Thus Coleridge's ambit becomes ever more constrained: "1. The Will. Hartley, & association confuted—2. We are seeking moral conviction. What is conviction? Certainty?—Then *a priori* notions explained & proved—it all comes to this, we being men, for *us* while we are men this must be believed—we cannot be men; we contradict our own nature, if we do not—i.e., if we require further proofs—" (*CN*, III, 3583). Nevertheless, Coleridge keeps returning to the refutation of Hartleian association, and just because such tail-chasing apriorism could never suffice. Such con-



viction is entirely without moral consequence. To refute Hartleian association it is certainly necessary to ground the will. But the will's *moral* consequence is the essential criterion of the will's importance. To be moral the will must act (as to be moral Coleridge must confute Hartley). Yet, as Coleridge was acutely aware, moral action—here, moral writing—risks moral conviction.

### III

Chapters v to vii of the *Biographia*, the scene of Coleridge's last and most lengthy encounter with Hartleian theory, exhibit most of the impedimenta that burden the book as a whole, and they vividly display that disruptive ebullience which characterizes Coleridge's prose. Argumentative when one would expect exposition, aphoristic when one longs for argument, the chapters also contain large amounts of material borrowed without citation, considerable chunks of prose taken from Coleridge's own writings, unprovoked and unjustified defamation of the living and the dead, and one Plotinian "o altitudo," which craftily forestalls any objections with something like a judgment on all merely mortal curiosity. Amid all this restless prose, however, there appears no attempt to substantiate the ontological or epistemological status of the free will. In order to determine whether or not the apparently gratuitous profusion of the peripheral actually bears on the discomposing absence of the central, we need to ask of this section, "What is the text?"

Coleridge begins Chapter v with an affirmation of "the natural difference of things and thoughts."<sup>6</sup> The latter "inward experiences" have been, he says, historically divided into "three separate classes: the passive sense, or what the schoolmen call the merely receptive quality of the mind; the voluntary; and the spontaneous, which holds the middle place between both." He then cites Sir James Mackintosh's opinion that the British empiricists made the only advance in the study of the spontaneous sense since the ancients and that

the law of association as established in the contemporaneity of the original impressions formed the basis of all true psychology; and any ontological, or

metaphysical science not contained in such (i.e., empirical psychology) was but a web of abstractions and generalizations. Of this prolific truth, of this great fundamental law, he declared Hobbes to have been the original discoverer, while its full application to the whole intellectual system we owe to David Hartley; who stood in the same relation to Hobbes as Newton to Kepler; the law of association being that to the mind, which gravitation is to matter. (*BL*, I, 67)

As the tone indicates, Coleridge mentions Mackintosh only to differ. Two differences emerge. First, Coleridge asserts, Mackintosh's conviction that the empiricists' psychology has priority over any metaphysics creates a "chasm" between them too wide to be bridged by the powers of discourse. Coleridge devotes most of Chapters v to vii to a refutation of the reduction, by British empiricists and by Hartley in particular, of inner experience to a single mode; he advocates instead the Aristotelian model of multiple causes. The second difference concerns historical priorities, and it is the one that Coleridge immediately addresses. He first disputes Hobbes's "claim" either to have deduced the principle of association or to have built anything on the principle he announced; Coleridge argues instead for the precedence of Descartes. Then comes a discussion of the history of association before both Hobbes and Descartes. Coleridge mentions the opinions of Melancthon, Ammerbach, and Vives and applauds Aristotle's ideas on the subject, which are, he says, theoretical, not hypothetical—that is, they are "unmixed with fiction" (*BL*, I, 71). The chapter ends with an attack on the originality of Hume's essay on association and, in passing, implicates Mackintosh in the discovery and consequent suppression of Hume's copy of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia* as annotated by Aquinas—proof for Coleridge of Hume's servile and unacknowledged dependence on the angelic doctor.

The facts about Coleridge's facts have long been known.<sup>7</sup> His attacks on Hobbes and Hume are inaccurate. His treatment of Aristotle, though largely accurate, is not his own, but was taken *variatis* from J. G. E. Maass's analysis of the theory and the history of association in his *Versuch über die Einbildungskraft*, published in 1797.

The unacknowledged borrowing from Maass



necessarily raises the question of Coleridge's plagiarism, and the unfounded allegations regarding Hobbes and Hume may make us less sympathetic to any likely excuse. Yet, McFarland's ingenious argument should make us aware that one of the major difficulties in discussing the *Biographia* is determining the precise nature of the offense. And to take up the issue of plagiarism here requires a consideration of the unexpected prominence of James Mackintosh, whose lectures are the text for many of Coleridge's charges and the pretext for the discussion of association itself. Why *should* Coleridge begin an 1815 discussion of association with an attack on opinions delivered in lectures eighteen years before?

Not only does Coleridge refer to those lectures, he echoes what seems to be a response to them that he had already recorded in 1801: the philosophical letters to Josiah Wedgwood Coleridge had taken up the Kepler-Newton-Hobbes-Hartley comparison and energetically discounted it (*CL*, II, 686).<sup>8</sup> We may suppose that Coleridge's lingering contempt for Mackintosh's reputation as a sagacious arbiter of philosophical controversies may have had something to do with his decision to choose him as the opposition in the *Biographia*,<sup>9</sup> as his haste in composition must have had a good deal to do with the pettiness of some of his objections. The connection with the Wedgwood letters suggests that, in his hurry to get something down on association, Coleridge may have consulted either his old manuscript (in the hands of Thomas Poole) or his tenacious memory and, seizing on the dispute between Locke and Descartes, substituted Hobbes for Locke in hopes of furnishing himself with a vehicle to begin his disquisition. By refurbishing Mackintosh for the occasion, Coleridge could take a position he loved: that of a conservative revisionist and a reluctant controversialist. More important, however, is the fact that he could not write without a "body of thought," as he told Southey in 1794 (*CL*, I, 137); whether it was the embodiment of thought in a personality to whom he could direct ad hominem arguments or conversational poems, the body of thought supplied by a text such as Mackintosh's lectures or his own letter, or the embodiment of a first principle, he needed a "sensible bulk," to use an Addisonian phrase,<sup>10</sup>

to guide his philosophical imagination and to provide a base for his comments. If the letter to Southey expresses the ebullient side of that need, this later note reveals a darker pathos: "My nature," Coleridge writes, "requires another Nature for its support, & reposes only in another from the necessary Indigence of its being" (*CN*, I, 1679). Bounty and indigence, ebullience and pathos—the *Biographia* encompasses both modes. In fact, they have become indistinguishable.

Coleridge's use of Maass in Chapter v also shows his persistent and overdetermined need for the support of "another nature." Coleridge had read and annotated Maass thoroughly; his marginalia show an understanding, even an assimilation, of the German's arguments.<sup>11</sup> Although it is possible to view Coleridge's entire argument as nothing more than a simple and unacknowledged development of the German's discussion of Aristotle's theory of multiple "occasioning causes," the evidence shows that Coleridge did not need to plagiarize Maass any more than he needed to contest Mackintosh.

In Coleridge's other writings the nearest contemporary anticipation of his specific criticism of Hartley is a notebook entry of 1811:

One fruitful remark on or against Hartley's *one Law of Time for Association* is that in different moods we naturally associate by different laws—as in Passion, by Contrast—in pleasurable states, by Likeness—&c. To be able to show the possibility of explaining these things verbally with Time—as Cause & effect always coming together, therefore remembered by *Time*—does not prove the *fact* that they are so—on the contrary, we clearly feel the difference in our own minds & know well when we remember a thing by accident & passively, & when actively—This important distinction of active & passive Remembrance is among the many Omissions of Hartley's System— (*CN*, III, 4059)

The contrast of the "One Law of Time" with the "different laws" closely resembles the governing distinction that Coleridge argues in the *Biographia*. We know that by this time he had read Maass,<sup>12</sup> but does the distinction here depend on an acquaintance with Maass's work? Coleridge gives no indication, but the evidence is strong that Coleridge did not at all need Maass to tell him that the one law of association is insufficient to account for all mental activity. We



may refer to Coleridge's letter to Southey in 1803 where he argues that "association depends in a much greater degree on the recurrence of resembling states of feeling, than on Trains of Ideas . . ." (*CL*, II, 961). If we follow Coleridge to chart his development toward an organic model, we are likely to emphasize his insistence on feeling as opposed to ideas;<sup>13</sup> but if we take our perspective on this passage from the *Biographia* and from notebook entry 4059, what is striking is the claim that resemblance is a mode of association every bit as significant as the simple contemporaneity of ideas. This letter might be urged as compelling evidence that the vaunted overthrow has taken place and that Coleridge has progressed beyond the doctrine of association, were it not that he had made the same distinction between kinds of association considerably before the 1801 letter to Poole.

In January–March 1800 Coleridge attended five of Mackintosh's second series of lectures on "The Laws of Nature and Nations." Coleridge did not complete the series, evidently because the lectures were the cause of more irritation than edification, an irritation that shows in Coleridge's sketchy notes.<sup>14</sup> But at least one comment there suggests that the time was not completely wasted: "M's Explication of Likeness as only a species of Contemporaneity to me vague & unmeaning" (*CN*, I, 634). Thus, a full year before his so-called overthrow of Hartley, Coleridge had expressed the basic distinction that he was to apply in his chapters on Hartley in the *Biographia*: resemblance is a kind of association distinct from, rather than subordinate to, contemporaneity. This goes far toward accounting for Coleridge's resurrection of Mackintosh in the *Biographia*; instead of inserting an anomalous reference to a dated lecture for the purpose of making a new argument, Coleridge is reusing an argument that he had annotated fifteen years before.

Nevertheless, we cannot yet conclude either that we have explained Coleridge's use of Mackintosh in the *Biographia* or that we have located the origin of Coleridge's critique of Hartley, for two months before he attended Mackintosh's lectures Coleridge had inscribed this query in his notebook, without apparent context, motive, or immediate consequence: "May not Time in Association be made *serviceable* & evidence

Likeness" (*CN*, I, 577). It is in this note—half statement, half question—regarding the serviceability of time that we can come closest to the germ of Coleridge's criticism of Hartleian association—before Mackintosh, before the overthrow of Hartley, before the letter to Southey, before the note in 1811, and long before the *Biographia*. The evidence suggests that Coleridge's other comments on association, beginning with his response to Mackintosh's lectures and concluding with the critique in the *Biographia*, are modified repetitions of the insight that Coleridge noted in 1799. It is significant that the provenance of the distinction of associations, as well as its several recapitulations, has nothing to do with an overthrow of association engineered from without; it is simply the discrimination of associations from within, effected with pre-Kantian philosophical tools. The history of Coleridge's dealings with association shows both that Coleridge did not consider his argument regarding its modes at all relevant to an overthrow of association and that neither Mackintosh nor Maass was essential to the formulation of that argument.

Although the distinction of causes was available to Coleridge as a proposition since 1799, he does not state it as an argument until the *Biographia*, in 1815. Before that it appears only in notes—notes on Mackintosh's lectures, notes on experience, notes on reading. When he finally argues it, he continues this method of presentation. Coleridge takes one small step forward by taking one long step back: he represents the texts as pretexts for his notes. Not only does Coleridge not need Mackintosh or Maass to make his argument, he does not *use* them to make an argument so much as he annexes the body of thought—Maass's text, Mackintosh's lectures—into his manuscript to supply a sustaining text that he can surround with marginalia: notes, interpolations, and revisions.

I agree with McFarland, then, that to call Coleridge's borrowing plagiarism is profitless: the moral blanket smothers the unarguable vitality and complexity of the text. We must mince our words, as Coleridge minced his. Yet the moral remission involved in the label "mosaic composition," the suggestion that Coleridge is simply a self-effacing, skillful craftsman, is equally misleading. Although Coleridge borrows



passages from other writers, every word in the *Biographia* is his writing. A book is not a mosaic; there are no brightly colored stones that the artist finds and arranges on a neutral background. Furthermore, Coleridge scarcely seems to have *composed* the *Biographia*, if by “compose” we mean the conscious, intentional act of bringing disparate materials into equilibrium. The *Biographia* is prose in a continual state of agitation; the main problem in reading it is determining what its subject, its orienting mode, is. The reason is that Coleridge practices not mosaic composition but marginal exegesis, not philosophy but commentary.

McFarland himself has pointed to the particular qualities of marginal commentary. In discussing Coleridge’s deep kinship with the German philosopher Friedrich Jacobi, McFarland has to account for the fact that Coleridge mentions Jacobi only rarely, and then primarily in disapproving marginal comments. To explain this, McFarland advances W. Schrickx’s “plausible hypothesis about the special emphasis of marginalia”: “Schrickx argues that it is ‘natural for those who enrich books with their marginal comments rather to disagree with or counter views of others to impose their own than to express enthusiasm for the author who is being annotated’ . . .” (McFarland, p. 133).<sup>15</sup> McFarland uses that hypothesis to serve his own postulate of a special sympathetic relationship between Coleridge and Jacobi. In other words, he plausibly employs Schrickx’s hypothesis to justify the practical consideration of marginal comments as inherently *equivocal*. A structural equivocation is indeed built into the annotative situation, for an apparently single voice is doubled by the addition of the note. Once added to the margins of the text, the comment makes it uncertain what the text *is*. The original text has its own claims and context, but the marginal comment always threatens to reduce the original text to a pretext for commentary—commentary, however, that could not be where it is were it not for the margins provided. The marginalium is thus both an enrichment and a deprivation of its host, just as it is, equivocally, neither inside nor outside the text. Marginalia exploit the articulations of sense and signification wherein respire the text’s own broken mortality.

Considered as discourse, marginalia are in a

similarly equivocal situation: philosophical goods are transported by a rhetorical vehicle. The beginning of Chapter vi, where Coleridge initiates his particular criticisms of Hartley’s system, furnishes a good example of the rhetorical character of the marginal method. Coleridge has two targets: the hypothesis of vibrations and the reduction of the laws of association to the single law of contemporaneity. The only logical or scientific criticism that Coleridge applies to Hartley, one of “a hundred possible confutations,” is taken from Maass’s analysis of the mechanical hypothesis:

According to this system the idea of vibration *a* from the external object A becomes associable with the idea of vibration *m* from the external object M, because the oscillation *a* propagated itself so as to reproduce the oscillation *m*. But the original impression from M was essentially different from the impression from A: unless therefore different causes may produce the same effect, the vibration *a* could never produce the vibration *m*; and this therefore could never be the means by which *a* and *m* are associated. (*BL*, I, 74–75)

Coleridge employs two other deductions by Maass to answer possible objections to the first. These deductions are refutations in kind of the scientific propositions that Hartley enumerated in the first chapter of *Observations on Man*. Coleridge does not, however, leave imagination to starve while reason luxuriates in its proper paradise: he ornaments the margins of Maass’s syllogisms with his own polished enthymemes—metaphorical illustrations of the German’s confutations. The method is effective: the deductions convince; illustrations such as the metaphor of the stone soup persuade.

Equally persuasive is Coleridge’s summary comment on the consequences of Hartley’s “material hypothesis”:

Thus the principle of contemporaneity, which Aristotle had made the common condition of all the laws of association, Hartley was constrained to represent as being itself the sole law. . . . Again, from this results inevitably that the will, the reason, the judgment and the understanding instead of being the determining causes of association, must needs be represented as its creatures and among its mechanical effects. Conceive, for instance, a broad stream, winding through a mountainous country with an indefinite number of currents, varying and



running into each other according as the gusts chance to blow from the opening of the mountains. The temporary union of several currents in one, so as to form the main current of the moment, would present an accurate image of Hartley's theory of the will.

Had this really been the case, the consequence would have been that our whole life would be divided between the despotism of outward impressions and that of senseless and passive memory.

(*BL*, I, 76–77)<sup>16</sup>

Coleridge has responded to Hartley's attempt to give a philosophical description of things as they are with an interpretive sketch of what things *might be like* if Hartley's account were accurate. First, he compares Hartley to Aristotle; then he comments on the inevitable consequences of Hartley's theory; then he asks us to conceive an image; *then* he says, "Had this been really the case. . . ." If *what* had really been the case? If the mind had really been a stream winding through a mountainous country? For a moment the reference floats; the clear image seems to displace the difficult concept of contingency that it is meant to represent. That grammatical slip-page is paralleled by the rhetorical displacement that Coleridge uses the image to effect. He employs his metaphor as a device to invert his opponents' position and to turn their own arguments against them: the stream image enables him to associate the associative model with caprice rather than with necessity; by removing the metaphor from its "natural" connection, he achieves a remarkable tour de force. Yet, the consequences of that rhetorical subversion are as ephemeral as those involved in the ambiguous grammatical reference. Because of its rhetorical character, Coleridge's criticism is inadequate as a refutation; instead, his removal of the image from its proper context, his "denaturalizing" of the metaphor, suggests that it can be reappropriated to serve antithetical ends. Without the anchor of the autonomous will, Coleridge's turn is liable to a similar overturning.<sup>17</sup> His prose imitates the contingency it argues.

The list of Coleridge's *topoi* can be expanded beyond this passage. It includes persuasive definitions: "the despotism of the eye," "the phantasmal chaos of association"; the *occupatio*: "we will pass by the utter incompatibility of such a law"; *reductio ad absurdum*: "the whole

universe co-operates to produce the minutest stroke of every letter"; and hyperbolic pathos: "the poor worthless I." Doubtless the list could be extended, and doubtless Coleridge's rhetoric has its effect. But that effectiveness has its price. One of the costs of marginal rhetoric is the complication of the author's relationship to an ambiguous text or an undisclosed truth, a relationship similar to the dyad of decoder-code. The decoder, like the annotator, may be considered to be in the margins of the text that he is analyzing, and that position is likewise equivocal; but he intends his situation to be only provisional: by solving the code and establishing the true text, he relieves the text of its marginal uncertainties and relinquishes his own uncertain position. The marginal commentator, however, relies on the bulk of his text to relieve *him* of the responsibility for systematic discourse, as the rhetorician's persuasive aims relieve him of the need for syllogistic rigor. The shift from a deliberate, scientific argument of inductive or deductive proof to a mobile, fragmentary discourse of persuasion provides the annotator with a kind of freedom that the decoder does not have; the annotator has no ground to defend, because his room—margins, interlinear spaces, gaps between words and letters—is provided for him by his host. The resourcefulness of the commentator derives from a tactical freedom to exploit aggressively any source of argument, and this freedom, in turn, depends on his fundamental distance from any general premise, just as the rhetorician's persuasiveness requires that his method be at a distance from any ultimate origin or end.

The duplicity of Coleridge's rootless marginal rhetoric is epitomized in Chapter vi, where he supports Maass's criticism of Hartley's vibrations by comparing the function of the nerve in Hartley's theory to "the flint which the wag placed in the pot as the first ingredient of his stone-broth, requiring only salt, turnips, and mutton for the remainder." The implicit claim of this metaphor is that the material factor is deficient in explanatory power without the addition of active, vital ingredients. To give life to matter, life must be added. That comparison is not a new one in Coleridge's writings; he used it in defending Priestleian unitarianism in Lecture 5 of his *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*:



Thus I have heard a very vehement Trinitarian explain himself away into a perfect Humanist! and the thrice strange Union of Father, Son and Holy Ghost in one God, each Person full and perfect God transmuted into the simple notion that God is love, and Intelligence and Life, and that Love, Intelligence and Life are God! a Trinity in Unity equally applicable to Man or Beast! Thus you are told of the wonderous Power of the Cross, yet you find that this wonder working Sacrifice possesses no efficacy unless there be added to it everything that, if God be benevolent, must be sufficient without it. This is the mysterious cookery of the Orthodox—promises to make Broth out of a Flint, but when you are congratulating yourself on the cheapness of your proposed Diet, requires as necessary ingredients, Beef, Salt and Turnips! But the Layman might say—I can make Broth out of Beef, Salt and Turnips myself. Most true! But the Cook would have no plea for demanding his wages were it not for his merit in dropping in the Flint. (pp. 207–08)

The same comparison is used by the Trinitarian Coleridge to characterize a uniformitarian concept of man that had earlier been used by a Unitarian Coleridge to ridicule a Trinitarian position. Whether defending Priestley or attacking him, Coleridge finds the parable of the mysterious cookery equally serviceable, because—though it appears to be the commonest of sense—it has no sense except as a rhetorical dislocation of the argument to which it is affixed. The flint metaphor works well as a criticism of Hartley's premise because it would work well as a criticism of any philosophical premise (what is the free will but the flint . . . ?) or as a criticism of philosophy itself (what is Being but the flint . . . ?). The reason the flint metaphor is omnipersuasive is that it differs only imperceptibly from any essential truth. Indeed, Coleridge's practice indicates that the flint metaphor may be a metaphor not only for all the metaphors in the stone soup of the *Biographia* but also for all philosophical metaphors, which are the flints to which the (metaphorical) herbs and meat of the (metaphorical) truth must be added. Is it the metaphor or the truth, then, that is additional? The sophisms that the commentator detects in the text are recapitulated in the margins in a finer tone.

The conclusion of the Hartley section exhibits Coleridge's argument and method at the breaking point. He describes the errors of association

as having "one sophism as their common genus: the mistaking the conditions of a thing for its causes and essence; and the process by which we arrive at the knowledge of a faculty, for the faculty itself" (*BL*, I, 85). Although Coleridge fortifies this distinction with examples, they assist him only to distinguish the Aristotelian species of association, which categorizes the various immediate causes of combination, from the simpler Hartleian kind, which attributes association solely to contemporaneity. One reduction, however, is open to another. What is the cause of the Aristotelian causes? Coleridge does not phrase that question, but he raises it when he admits that the Aristotelian categories "cannot be indeed separated from contemporaneity; for that would be to separate them from the mind itself" (*BL*, I, 87). In other words, the notion of an integral consciousness (the ego, the self that is somewhere present to itself) depends on the premise of the contemporaneity of the mind—its temporal identity with itself. Hence it would appear *essentially* accurate in respect to Coleridge's own ontology to hold the contemporaneity of the mind as the *condition* and final *cause* of all acts of the mind; to distinguish final from efficient causes does not alter the necessary connection. Coleridge recognizes that any *real* progress beyond necessitarian association requires, somewhere along the line, the rejection of contemporaneity; but he also sees that that would entail an admission of a constitutive or deconstitutive difference, which would in turn jeopardize the primordial unity of being that grounds all principle and all philosophy and that keeps the arbitrary play of the will within bounds. It is only in the decomposition of a tyrannous unity of consciousness that freedom can be located, if at all, although to locate it "there" would be to reduce freedom to a deconstitutive interruption of all certainty, including the certainty of freedom itself. Too close attention to the ground of freedom would lead to an endless series of questions, and freedom would be submitted to that ceaseless discontinuous change from which Coleridge recoils: the interruption of necessity, the necessity of interruption.<sup>18</sup> Such a closure of metaphysics is the terminal hazard that Coleridge's method constantly struggles to evade. That it is foreseen and feared makes all the difference in his prose. As he has displaced the



text with marginalia, philosophy with rhetoric, logic with metaphor, so here he displaces the central question with dispute over efficient causes. In the service of a greater certainty, Coleridge swerves into equivocation. He preserves metaphysics by burying it in commentary. The chapter closes with a wish that has only marginal significance:

Sound logic, as the habitual subordination of the individual to the species, and of the species to the genus; philosophical knowledge of facts under the relation of cause and effect; a cheerful [sic] and communicative temper, disposing us to notice the similarities and contrasts of things, that we may be able to illustrate the one by the other; a quiet conscience; a condition free from anxieties; sound health, and above all (as far as relates to passive remembrance) a healthy digestion; *these* are the best, these are the only ARTS OF MEMORY.

(*BL*, I, 87–88)

We began our investigation of Chapters v–vii of the *Biographia* with the question, “What is the text?” The answer to that question has become ever more elusive as we have proceeded. That, I would maintain, is because all of Coleridge’s comments are marginalia on a central text that can be variously described as the will, God, true philosophy, Being, or the Bible<sup>19</sup> but that is present only so far as his disorienting commentary calls attention to its absence. That text is the central principle, or the idea of a central principle, that grounds and justifies all intellection, feeling, and action. It is the transparent and unified text supposedly at the bottom of all words. Yet Coleridge acts out the dilemma that Hartley had already expressed: “it is difficult to explain words to the bottom with words; perhaps impossible.”<sup>20</sup> He does so by, in effect, giving up a quest that might open up an infinite and infinitely debilitating regress. For that search, however, Coleridge has simply substituted its proper metaphor—a rootless, endlessly fascinating prose. Entirely rhetorical, Coleridge’s own metaphors have no philosophical content. But his rhetoric has philosophical significance just because it traverses the boundaries of philosophy. Because Coleridge’s rhetoric is added to a philosophical argument, because his marginalia are inserted in the text, they make the point that the philosophy, susceptible to interruption, is equivocal, that it has margins.

That point is, of course, without substance. Coleridge’s marginal method may indeed suggest that Hartley’s system (or Schelling’s system<sup>21</sup>) has inconsistencies, but such a criticism can be annexed to any system—to philosophy itself. All philosophical certainties have inconsistencies and interruptions; all texts have margins.

Coleridge recognizes that Hartley, “excellent and pious” in his personal life, erred when he attempted to add to his moral practice a philosophy that would make morality a necessary function of man’s mortal frame. That error is double: Hartley’s system would lead to “the equal degradation of every *fundamental* idea in ethics or theology” (*BL*, I, 83); and Hartley’s writing *as writing* is subject to the interruptions of commentators, benevolent or malicious. To write philosophy is to sacrifice the certainties that philosophy is intended to serve. Coleridge’s marginal method—oblique, fragmentary, mobile, personal, aggressive—is an attempted evasion of that consequence, but his writing engenders its own equivocal consequences: it produces no fundamental ideas, no moral principles, but only the difference between what is and what one wishes might be. The moral motive of Coleridge’s philosophical rhetoric feeds amoral ends: by too often taking the wish for the act, Coleridge persuades that they are virtually the same—provisional articulations of a restless desire. Coleridge’s fictions undermine the context they are meant to serve, yielding anomalous interruptions instead of autonomous truths, producing not a philosophical argument but a bizarre book.

#### IV

The fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values*. It has not even occurred to the most cautious among them that one might have a doubt right here at the threshold where it was surely most necessary—even if they vowed to themselves, “*de omnibus dubitandum*.”

For one may doubt, first, whether there are any opposites at all, and secondly whether these popular valuations and opposite values on which the metaphysicians put their seal, are not perhaps merely foreground estimates, only provisional perspectives, perhaps even from some nook, perhaps from below, frog perspectives, as it were, to borrow an expression painters use. (Nietzsche)<sup>22</sup>



It is, I think, a similarly metaphysical faith that tempts one to respond with sympathy or with scorn to the evidence of Coleridge's plagiarisms: the faith that the coherence and seriousness of a work must be a reflection of fundamentally pure motives or that the impurity of motives is an assurance of the corruption of the work. Though sharing similar premises, Thomas McFarland, in *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, has sophisticated the notion of authorship to match Coleridge's overall philosophical task of reconciling apparently incompatible conceptions of being in the world, that is, those philosophies whose starting point is "I am" and those beginning "it is." The former accord priority to the sense of a free, determinant self. The latter begin with the objectivity of the world and end with an absolute, pantheistic monism, which saves phenomena by making the self and its freedom phenomenal. McFarland sees Coleridge as an ambivalent thinker who was simultaneously attracted to the "reticulative" power of systematic philosophy and repulsed by the dreadful consequences that such an impersonal system has for the individual. As it became increasingly and painfully clear to him that the free self must either be accepted as an inconsistency within a system whose primary attraction is its consistency or be completely abandoned, Coleridge turned from formal philosophy, with its corollary of pantheism, to a Trinitarian Christianity, which grounds the moral freedom of the individual soul in the existence of a transcendent, personal God, while it systematically seeks the reconciliation of God and soul with nature.

Beyond furnishing an admirable example of the architectonic concerns he sees as paramount in Coleridge, McFarland shows that the personal Coleridge and the philosopher are integrated through an ambivalence operating at every level of expression. And that diagnosis enables McFarland not only to consider such practices as plagiarism as primarily relational but also to view the man, the reticulative thinker, in a relational manner: for McFarland, "Coleridge was the 'living link between religion and philosophy' for his own age" (p. 53). For him the content of Coleridge's thought is less important than the ambivalent stance he took; as for Hamlet, "this seeming indecision before conflicting claims is a true emblem of his integrity" (p. 107). Note

that a dynamic ambivalence is emblemized into a synthetic integrity, just as plagiarism is metaphorized into mosaic composition. True to his metaphysical faith, McFarland divides the world—"I am" and "it is," free will and pantheism, religion and philosophy, prose and poetry—and conquers it. As Coleridge reconciles reason and faith in Trinitarian Christianity, so does McFarland domesticate ambivalence by subordinating it to the comprehensive integrity of Coleridge's project: the persistent vitality of the writer and the unity of the telos in the intended magnum opus: "Though the *magnum opus* could never be written, it existed—as heaven does in the minds of mortals—as the hypothetical servicing of Coleridge's needs; and it is therefore not merely a concrete plan dating from a certain period around the year 1815, but an omnipresent reality, even when imperfectly expressed" (p. 194).

Coleridge had, for all we know, his mortal dreams of heaven and his mortal fears of hell. But the topography of his writings is surely limbo. His imperfect expression of the regions of reality is a legible deferral of perfect expression. For a period beginning in 1815, the time of the concrete planning of the magnum opus, most of Coleridge's writing reflects a truly liminal mind by means of what is best called marginal discourse: in 1815–16 he added the marginal gloss to the "Ancient Mariner"; in 1816 he published "Kubla Khan" with the marginal addition of the monitory preface; in 1815–17 he wrote the *Biographia Literaria* (preface or book?), delaying its publication until he could fill the blank pages of the second volume with supplementary material; in 1816 and 1817 he published *The Statesmen's Manual* and *A Lay Sermon*, the former floating on five appendixes, neither released to his friends without thorough annotation; and in 1818 he brought out *The Friend*, where the complex interplay of genres—mottoes, plagiarisms, anonymous letters, biographical anecdotes, political allegories—entirely discomposes the text. All these works seem intended to serve the single aim of grounding experience on a single, central principle or vision. But in all the centripetal force is continually overmatched by the centrifugal; reading them provides the characteristic Coleridgean experience of being on a circle whose circumference is nearly every-

where and whose center is almost nowhere. The Coleridge of this period is, to rephrase Leavis, at the fine point of discourse. The eventual blunting of that point can be associated with Coleridge's acceptance of the mysteries of Trinitarianism, when his discourse congealed into the oracular style of *Aids to Reflection* (1825), a style that, as John Holloway has indicated,<sup>23</sup> strongly influenced the rhetorical pose of the Victorian sage.

There is no sage in the stone soup of the *Biographia*. There the fine point of discourse implacably disrupts both polarities and resolutions, disturbs the tranquil abstractions of "I am" and "it is," and disseminates significance through both the text and its articulate margins. To attempt to recuperate that process by labeling it "ambivalence" or "integrity" is to dilute its proper power. Indeed, the syndrome of arrested ambivalence that is attributed to Coleridge may be more properly ascribed to his commentators,

who unanimously attest to the uneasiness that his writings provoke and who invariably leap to terminate such an unproductive deferral of truth. Reading Coleridge is of considerable value not because he triumphs over ambivalence or mirrors our metaphysical faith but because he compels us to stand before his writings in a special manner, in much the same way as he tells us he stood before his favorite fiction, *The Arabian Nights*. "The book," he writes, "I well remember, used to lie in a corner of the parlour window at my dear Father's Vicarage-house: and I can never forget with what a strange mixture of obscure dread and intense desire I used to look at the volume and watch it, till the morning sunshine had reached and nearly covered it, when, and not before, I felt the courage given me to seize the precious treasure and hurry off with it to some sunny corner in our playground."<sup>24</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (1968; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1973), pp. 131–38; Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (New York: Braziller, 1971); Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 1–52.

<sup>2</sup> The most complete discussion of the evidence of Coleridge's interest in Hartleian association is in J. A. Appleyard's *Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 22–42. Appleyard's skepticism regarding the strength of Coleridge's attraction must be modified, however, in the light of the evidence furnished by the publication of Coleridge's "Lectures on Revealed Religion," in *Lectures 1795 on Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, Vol. I of *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Collected Works*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971). One must agree with Peter Mann that these lectures make it "difficult now to over-emphasise the importance of Hartley's system to Coleridge during the formative years 1794–6" (p. lix).

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–59), I, 398. Hereafter cited as *CL*.

<sup>4</sup> See A. O. Lovejoy, "Coleridge and Kant's Two Worlds," in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1948), pp. 254–76, which remains unsurpassed in its insight into the reasons for Coleridge's break with associationism and in its for-

mulation of the difficulties that beset his projected refutation.

<sup>5</sup> *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Vols. I & II (New York: Pantheon, 1957, 1961); Vol. III (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), 3559. Hereafter cited as *CN*, followed by the volume number and the number of the entry.

<sup>6</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (1907; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), I, 66. Hereafter cited as *BL*.

<sup>7</sup> These facts are best presented in the notes to the edition of the *Biographia Literaria* prepared by Henry Nelson Coleridge and completed and published by Sara Coleridge in 1847. This edition forms the third volume of *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper, 1884).

<sup>8</sup> In the letter Coleridge does not specifically attribute the comparison to Mackintosh.

<sup>9</sup> The contempt is well documented. In May of 1800 Coleridge writes to William Godwin of "the great Dung-fly Mackintosh"; in October of that year he concludes a scurrilous verse satire (part of the *Skeletoniad*) on the Scotchman in a letter to Humphry Davy; in October of 1801 he writes that, "as to his [Mackintosh's] conversation, it was all uncommonly *well-worded*: but not a thought in it worthy of having been worded at all" (*CL*, I, 588, 633; II, 771).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Addison, *Critical Essays from the Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press,



1970), *Spectator* 420, p. 204. Addison uses the phrase to describe the matter that the imagination or fancy requires to prevent its loss in "a kind of chasm."

<sup>11</sup> Selection from these marginalia are reproduced in Sara Coleridge's *Biographia*, pp. 214–15, nn.

<sup>12</sup> Coleridge's only mention of "Maass" in his notebooks is in a puzzling 1809 entry, where he is referred to as a source for a projected ode on the dream vision of Galileo (*CN*, III, 3585).

<sup>13</sup> This is the position taken by J. A. Appleyard in his discussion of the passage in *Coleridge's Philosophy of Literature*, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> For example: "Talked a great deal of Nonsense about *judgment* & used a most false example of a Parent's Love to a worthless Infant—might as well have talked of the love to unroasted meat" (*CN*, I, 634).

<sup>15</sup> The quotation from W. Schrickx is in "Coleridge and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 36 (1958), 841.

<sup>16</sup> As Shawcross notes, Coleridge's remark that "our whole life would be divided between the despotism of outward impressions and that of senseless and passive memory" is taken directly from Coleridge's marginal notes on Maass. Cf. Sara Coleridge, *BL*, p. 228, n.

<sup>17</sup> One is tempted to call this rhetorical maneuver the fallacy of the distinct image, or perhaps even the fallacy of clarity. Coleridge refers to it when he describes those "individuals (Laodiceans in spirit, Minims in faith, and nominalists in philosophy) who mistake outlines for substance and distinct images for clear conceptions . . ." (*The Statesman's Manual*, ed. R. J. White, *Collected Works*, Vol. vi, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972, Appendix D, p. 93). A criticism of the same fallacy from a different point of view appears in one of Ludwig Wittgenstein's comments on the concept of "game": "One might say that the concept 'game' is a concept with blurred edges.—'But is a blurred concept a concept at all?—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?" (*Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed., New York: Macmillan, 1968, Vol. I, Entry 71). In this case the distinctness of the "outline" of Coleridge's image blurs the clarity of the concept that it has been invented to affirm.

<sup>18</sup> The trope most appropriate to this deconstitutive origin is the chiasmus, which is fabricated on the shadow of its own collapse: the interruption of necessity, the necessity of interruption; or, as Coleridge puts it: "the still rising Desire still baffling the bitter Experience, the bitter Experience still following the gratified Desire" (*CN*, I, 1456).

<sup>19</sup> The Bible would seem to have special status within such a catalog of texts, but, as E. S. Shaffer has shown in her book "*Kubla Khan*" and *The Fall of Jerusalem* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), Coleridge's energies in biblical criticism were mainly directed toward removing the Bible from its place of privilege as *the* sacred text. In a complex argument, Shaffer persuades us that Coleridge was an early and

sophisticated practitioner of the higher criticism of the Bible, one who subscribed to that movement's aim of rigorous rational scrutiny and who applied its literary approach. The consequence of that method was "a new apologetics of free-thinking theism which was to salvage Christianity until very near the end of the Victorian era" (p. 63). For Coleridge the consequence was an insistence, on the one hand, that the evidences of inspiration and revelation are fundamentally subordinate to a core of doctrine and, on the other, that new conceptions of history as myth and of the prophet as visionary could be used to bridge "that epic gap between 'fact' and 'sacred story' that so plagued the Enlightenment" (p. 53), to expand the sacred subject to the entire human community, and to furnish a secular, historical speaker who, inspired by the mythic concept of man, would periodically reconstruct the primordial spiritual experience for the participation of later men. One of the most nearly perfect examples of that visionary ideal is, according to Shaffer, Coleridge's lyrical ballad "Kubla Khan."

The response of the fundamentalist Christian to such criticism—with its mobility of reference, its rationalist insistence on inconsistencies, and its embrace of a wide range of Asiatic religions—might very well be that the commentary has destroyed the text. But such a response depends on just that naive, untenable notion of the sacred text as holy book that the higher criticism sought to correct. On that level, Shaffer is certainly entitled to her dialectic: the book is destroyed to preserve a sacred, transcendent text. Yet from a specifically Coleridgean perspective the function of the commentary seems less benign than Shaffer would have it, the progress of the dialectic less assured. For one thing, Coleridge remained committed to a core of *Christian* doctrine (including the concept of free will), which he "abstracted" from the books of the Bible (see *CN*, III, 3754) and which forms a part not easily integrated with the transcendent whole. For another, the concept of a participation in the vision of the poet-prophet depends on a translucency of symbolic language that is highly problematic in the "Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan," the poems that Shaffer uses as her foundations. She is least satisfactory in her account of the preface to "Kubla," and she does not discuss the gloss to the "Ancient Mariner"—both marginal commentaries, both added at about the time of the writing of the *Biographia*, and both demonstrations of the limits of the reader's (or, indeed, the teller's) authentic participation in a "visionary" experience. Not poems that communicate the experience of the Edenic dream, they are discourses that compel us to confront what Geoffrey Hartman has called "the dream of communication."

<sup>20</sup> David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (1749; rpt. New York: Garland, 1971), I, 277.

<sup>21</sup> Coleridge uses Schelling in the *Biographia* in much the same way as he uses Maass and Mackintosh. Schelling's words furnish plausible certainties that are the pretexts for the annotator's own desired certainties. At one point in Thesis VII Coleridge uses Schelling's argu-

ment as an authority for freedom of the will, but then he extends that authority in his own remarks to privilege the will before and beyond philosophy: "The self-conscious spirit therefore is a will; and freedom must be assumed as a *ground* of philosophy, and can never be deduced from it" (*BL*, I, 185). Although Coleridge considers the will only to remove it from consideration, it is nonetheless rendered equivocal. That peremptory and gnomic assertion would serve as well for a harmless corollary to Hartley's model, which similarly privileges a similarly absent divinity, as it would for a confutation of it. And in an addition to Schelling in Thesis IX, Coleridge furnishes a summation that could have been written by Hartley, or Coleridge during his Hartleian

period: "We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to lose and find all self in GOD" (*BL*, I, 186). That just such a process had been "*demonstrated* by Hartley" was the stimulus to Coleridge's rhapsody in the 1796 "*Religious Musings*" (*Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912], II, 39–45 and pp. 110–11, n.).

<sup>22</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage-Random, 1966), p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> *The Victorian Sage* (1953; rpt. New York: Norton, 1965), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *The Friend* (1818), ed. Barbara Rooke (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), *The Collected Works*, IV, Pt. 1, 148, Coleridge's note.